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Book Review of *The Nation's Largest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West* by James R. Skillen.

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The Nation's Largest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West. By James R. Skillen. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009. xvi + 297 pp. Maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

James Skillen provides a comprehensive assessment of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), its origins, evolution, and ongoing efforts to manage the public lands for an increasing array of resources. His account documents the legal and political matrix in which the agency operates, recording the roles of key actors and processes that have influenced public lands administration, including members of Congress and presidential administrations, interest group politics, and efforts to bring expertise to the task of managing the public lands.

Skillen organizes the results of his investigation into a chronology characterizing the BLM's mandates and operations through two themes: "questions about the purposes and goals of public lands administration and questions about the decision-making processes that govern the public lands." In tracking the conflicting responses to these questions throughout the history of public lands administration, Skillen concludes that ambiguity in this context is a given. Even so, he offers patterns and lessons.

Skillen describes an expanding set of purposes for the public lands, an expansion accompanied by the push and pull of political processes. This pattern parallels the general environmental agenda in the United States. Debates about development, conservation, and preservation can be expected to continue in the arena of public lands politics. This part of Skillen's tale is often told in natural resource circles. His service is in documenting its evolution in the history of the BLM and public lands administration.

With respect to decision-making processes, the debate is about who should have power and influence. In describing this debate, Skillen draws on a dichotomy of interest group politics and agency expertise. This dichotomy is documented in the field of public administration where

dilemmas posed by the tension between the functions of administration and politics have long been recognized. Skillen provides insights into how these processes take shape in public lands administration. For example, his attention to the emergence of range science and its tension with practical knowledge held by on-the-ground ranchers offers useful context for debates about how grazing management decisions are made. More generally, the expanding list of purposes for the public lands has generated an increasing number of potential participants in decision-making processes. Skillen notes the implications of this, given current trends towards collaborative decision making in natural resource management.

Skillen provides an even-handed treatment of public lands administration. He does not take an advocacy stance in favor of a particular set of goals for public lands or in favor of a particular approach to decision making. He does call for a coherent identity for the public lands and for another iteration of assessment for new directions in public lands administration. He also provides lessons about the evolution of ideas and institutions with respect to our uses of and relationships to public lands, to developing and applying knowledge, and to managing our relationships with each other in the process. **Clare Ginger**, *Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, University of Vermont*.